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ABSTRACT

A survey of 16 rural students attending college in Perth, Australia, found that all of them felt disadvantaged because of issues specific to their rural status. These issues were emotional, social, and financial or a combination thereof. The emotional and social concerns were loneliness, making new friends, and learning to adjust to an urban lifestyle, all of which stemmed from the fact that rural students had to leave their home support systems to attend college. However, financial problems were of greatest concern. These difficulties help to explain why rural students have a lower retention rate in higher education, resulting in their minority status in university enrollments and therefore life-improving opportunities. Suggested strategies for improving this situation are the provision of additional financial assistance to all rural students by the government, and the provision of university support groups for rural students, such as counsellors, academic staff, student administration, and medical suites. These strategies could make a critical difference for many rural students undertaking or considering college attendance. (TD)

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Research in Families
Bachelor of Social Science (Children Studies)
Edith Cowan University
Semester One

Identification of Barriers that confront rural Students entering the University system

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ABSTRACT

The rural life is a wonderful life for many: with open spaces, often small, close knit communities and reduced hustle and bustle due to smaller populations. But in conjunction with these smaller populations comes the limited provisions of goods and services. Services that provide both life and employment enhancing opportunities to their consumer. Universities are such services. It is because of this lack of provisional tertiary education in rural regions, that the majority of rural youths must leave their homes, families and thus support networks. University can be an exciting time where new friends, knowledge and contacts are made. However for these rural students who have made the transition to university, it is not only the university life that they must now adjust to, rather there are many consequential and therefore additional

BARRIERS THAT CONFRONT RURAL STUDENTS ENTERING THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural youth of Australia are a minority group. In 1986 they accommodated only 26% of Western Australia's total youth population. Being a minority group they relieve limited provision of services and therefore limited access to life improving resources. Because of these limited resources many rural youth must make the transition from their rural environment to an often very different city lifestyle, where the necessary services are offered. Such a transition must occur for most West Australian rural youth/students if they wish to undertake tertiary education in this state and hence improve their life opportunities.

For the purpose of this research I have adopted Barker's and Milligan's (1990) broad definition of rural. That is any 'provincial centre of significant size as well as smaller country towns and communities'. Places such as Albany, Kalgoorlie and Bunbury along with all other country towns will therefore be included within this definition. In addition I will also include the often separately classified remote regions.

As identified above a transition must occur for most rural students who wish to undertake tertiary studies. Their reason as also identified above are purely the lack of life improving opportunities within rural areas. It is the provision of these life improving opportunities, or the lack of, that dominate the majority of documented information with reference to rural youth.
It must not be mistaken however, that all information documented or not, is of uttermost importance and essential if change in rural area is to occur. But it isn't going to be an overnight occurrence and thus rural students must still make the move away from their rural environment for tertiary education. By doing so they must also leave their social, emotional

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and financial support, whether it be family or friends, behind. They do not have to cope only with the new ordeal of university life, but they must also cope now with accessing new resources in a new environment as an independent away from their support network.

Documented information on the issues facing rural students undertaking tertiary studies in metropolitan areas is sparse and if accessible usually combined with the provision of services to rural areas, and therefore brief. This is the case with Baker and Milligan (1990) who have identified many issues experienced by rural youth, yet as their report title suggests, their main focus in on "Improving Services for rural Young People: Strategies for change". They have however referenced other authors who have made comment on the issues facing young rural people. Breen (1987) and Hartley (1989) were two such authors yet they weren't accessible.

Boylan's (1991) "Coming in from the Country" report on Charles Sturt University - Riveranna, acknowledges that university life does include a lot of other factors for rural students. This perhaps giving reason to the fact that 'rural students historically and currently have lower retention rates in both secondary and tertiary education'. Charles Sturt University appointed a Rural Student Liaison Officer with this is mind.

Although not the same specification, the University of Western Australia also offers a programme to assist with the transition. The Transition Support Programme is available and offered to all UWA students yet rural students are a particular focus group. The existence of this programme was brought to my attention through word of mouth. I found this, word of mouth, to be the primary source of information about issues facing rural students undertaking in tertiary education in Perth. After making telephone and then personal contact with Greg Price of the Western Australian rural Youth Federation Inc. he brought to my attention the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia where I spoke at length with Julie Islop. It was at YACWA that I gained a large percentage of information on rural youth by means of speaking with Julie and accessing their library.

It became apparent to me through this snowball effect of personal communication that much of the knowledge and therefore information related to this topic can only be obtained via the rural students themselves who have first hand experience. Interpretation and analysis of such experiences can then be made and the issues identified.

In conjunction with this belief and the lack of already documented information on this topic I believe there is a necessity for research into this field to be conducted. Through means of this research paper I will endeavour to fill or at least lessen the gap.

RESEARCH QUESTION

ISSUES FACING RURAL STUDENTS UNDERTAKING TERTIARY EDUCATION IN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

RESEARCH PARAGDIGM

"In simple terms, a paradigm is a set of propositions that explain how the word is perceived' (Sarantakos, 1993). This research paper reflects one of the major paradigms - The Interpretive. Reflection of such occurs throughout this research with particular reference to the questionnaire, what and how the questions asked, as well as interpretations of all gathered information. Interpretation is a key component of the interpretive paradigm and therefore becomes a key component of this research. Interpretation of the subjects personal experiences as they better understand the issues facing rural students. Although not entirely, Qualitative research also reflects many of this paradigms assumptions. It is this form of research methodology that is primarily employed for the purpose of this research. As its name suggests research of this type places emphasis on the quality and meaning of the experience

rather than its quantity. It also perceives the researcher and researched (the subjects) that are the vital source of information, required by this research. The research rather is the one obtaining interpreting and analysing their experiences and therefore knowledge of the topic at hand.

SUBJECTS

The prerequisites required to be chosen as a voluntary participant in this research were, to be either male or female currently studying at any of Western Australia's universities, but who is from their rural environment (rural as defined in the literature review) and therefore was required to move to Perth to undertake in tertiary studies. The rural students form(s) of accommodation were also considered so as to gather a broad range of personal experiences.

Questionnaires were mailed to a total of 20 rural students, 10 to female rural students and 10 to male rural students. Of the total 20 questionnaires mailed out, 16 were returned either fully or partly completed.

MATERIALS

Questionnaire
See appendix (ii)

PROCEDURE

As identified above under the heading of subjects, questionnaires were sent to 20 rural tertiary students. If any problems on the subjects behalf arose, I will have had included my contact number and thus allowing them to quickly clear any of their concerns up with me. I also provided a self addressed and stamped envelope to each subject, so as after completion of the questionnaire they could promptly return it to me by Friday 11th April, 1997, allowing analysis to begin.

ANALYSIS

Completed and returned questionnaires allowed me to interpret and gather further information on and then identify the issues facing rural students undertaking tertiary education in Perth. With identification of these issues I will further discuss and describe each particular one with reference to additional literature and any relevant questions as asked in the questionnaire. Possible implications resulting in the identification of the issues will also be identified and discussed. All results and discussions of this research comprise a large percentage of the final research report.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Confidentiality is of uttermost importance when conducting research. Confidentiality of the participant's name, personal details and raw data supplied to the researcher for such a purpose. By providing a consent form, which the voluntary participant is required to sign, clearly identifies their part in the research as well as your obligation to keep all information data to yourself and if necessary your research supervisor. This is achieved by means of ensuring only yourself and your research supervisor have access to the date through a password to which raw data many be obtained via a computer. On completion of the research all relevant raw data will be disposed of by shredding it.

RESULTS

It was the purpose of this research to identify the issues facing rural students undertaking tertiary education in Perth, Western Australia. Of the 20 questionnaires mailed to voluntary participant, 17 were returned either fully or partly completed, and it is from this source that all results (issues facing rural students) have been derived.

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It is the belief of participants in this research that they are disadvantaged when attending university in Perth because of their rural status and consequently the additional issues that face them. Whether emotional, social and/or financial these issues are believed to make it harder to cope with and succeed at university. Emotional, social and financial headings will be used below so as to clearly identify the issues that do face rural students who are undertaking tertiary studies in Perth, W.A. Although divided under headings many of the issues are relevant to more than one and all related to and influence one another.

EMOTIONAL

For all participants in this research there was no choice in moving away from home if they were to improve their life opportunities by means of tertiary education and hence a university degree. For most the initial move to Perth was not traumatic. Of the 16 participants, 13 had been living at home before their move and of those, 4 found it difficult to leave. One participant had been living away from home in a country hostel situation yet still found it difficult to leave her home and family once again. An emotional strength for each participant was that they all had family and/or friends that provided them with support. All participants also stated that their form of accommodation was of advantage to them. One particular form of accommodation - a residential college, was identified to provide great emotional support to all that live there. All residents are rural students and thus experiencing similar difficulties to one another. The support and help offered to deal with any difficulties often substituted what would otherwise be provided by parents, siblings, other family members and/or friends in the student's home environment.

This support from mum, dad and/or another source from the home environment was missed by the majority of all participants at times when difficulties arose. Such problems included sickness, a death, when the student was angry and/or annoyed, times of family celebrations that he/she missed out on because of distance or study commitments, university difficulties, exams, loneliness, personal reasons and/or money reasons. In addition to these times, some students also found it hard to settle into their new lifestyle and missed their families once a week, once a month or even once a day.

For many, the presence of friends, made at school and/or in the home environment, who were also in Perth were not of importance to them. Someone to talk freely to, a familiar face and hopefully someone who knows about other relevant resources. However, it wasn't long before a large percentage of the students stated that they easily established new friendships. New friendships were of great help as they gave many new rural tertiary students confidence, which flowed into all domains of their lives and added enjoyment and opportunities into their new lifestyles.

Without these friendships and/or any of the other support forms, the transition from home to Perth would have been very difficult emotionally, and thus it becomes obvious that although these rural students have come to Perth so as to attend university they are faced with a lot more deal with (ie coping with difficulties by themselves away from family support) other than only university. With respect to university life however 3 rural students were overwhelmed by the size of their university, and 11 of the 16 felt comfortable with the number of other students in their lectures. The majority had spoken informally to their lecturers, yet 9 remained unknown to the fact that support groups existed for their use on campus if needed.

Of the 8 Edith Cowan University participants, 5 believed that support groups existed, but 2 of which believed them to be only offering academic support, the remaining 3 believed no groups existed for their use. These figures compared with 4 University of Western Australia students

knowing of existing support groups, leaving only 1 student who didn't and 2 Curtin participants who did, with again 1 who didn't.

But when they first started university 9 out 16 participants did not have any knowledge of these groups. This issue of support groups is later discussed to further detail, under the 'discussion' heading.

Because of the emotional pressures placed on rural students, 5 of the participants acknowledged that they had given serious thought to taking time off university and with an additional 3 identifying that it would be nice, yet isn't a realistic approach for them. All would repeat the move away from home to Perth so to attend university, bar 1 who would defer for a year, yet only because they have no choice in the matter if they are to improve their life opportunities.

SOCIAL

Socially the transition made from home to Peth provided an exciting time in most of the participants lives. The need for independence from parents, the chance of meeting new people of similar ages, broadening minds to what life hast to offer and the general social life of Perth were all believed to be positives in moving to Perth. As identified in the previous heading the majority of participants didn't find the initial move from home difficult to make. And once again yet this with reference to the social domain of the participant's lives, a large percentage found their accommodation to be an advantage to them. Renting a property with others allowed for the independence, meeting new people and the general social life. Though it was perhaps the residential colleges that allowed for the greatest social aspect in their new lives. Living with up to 160 other rural tertiary students all of similar age to one another, it becomes no wonder. Accommodation partners were the largest representative of new friends made, the second being university colleges (9 participants), followed closely by the additional social groups (7). New friendships were easily established according to 12 of the participants and because of this made their time in Peth and therefore at university more enjoyable. However although the majority stated that it was easy to establish new friendships there are a remaining 4 who didn't agree and an additional 3 that found neither easy or hard. For those 5 who did find it difficult, the time whilst establishing the friendships was difficult and added to the already existing pressures of moving away from home. Missing their families was more common for these participants, as limited friends meant there weren't as many people to share both good and bad experiences with and therefore could have been very lonely. Those who found it difficult to establish new friends also experienced anxiety, homesickness, university difficulties and found it hard to deal with new everyday experiences in their lifestyles.

Of these problems many are emotions and thus the inter-relation between domains in these participants new lives.

The knowledge of support groups available to them at their university is another example which affects participants dealings with university and associated difficulties. The existence and knowledge of support groups for rural students enables ways in which the students, especially those who are finding it difficult to establish new friends and socialise with one another. From the total of 16 participants 9 had no knowledge now, that such support groups may exist at their universities, let alone now when they first began.

FINANCIAL

The financial domain in the rural students lives is yet another area that although not directly, a rural support group could provide support for. It is this domain of their new lives, the financial, that all research participants have identified to cause the most difficulties. All on a scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree, strongly agreed that it

costs them and/or their families more as rural students to attend university than it would for a city student. One participant had a conversation with university two friends who approximated it cost them and/or their families 1. $2,000 to live at home or 2. $6,000 when travelling from Mundaring for university. The participant themselves estimated that for themselves to attend university it would cost them and/or their family $10,000 plus, simply because the consequences of being a rural student and hence having to live away from home.

When moving away from home, rural students leave behind the basic yet essential appliances, as well as the financial convenience of everyday household supplies being available to use and even the convenience of having food provided. If setting up a house is required due to rental essentials such as table, chairs, fridge, washing machine, toaster, etc all of which are taken for granted in a home situation - must be purchased usually by means of financial purchase.

The participants who are not in this accommodation situation have still identified that rent is required for staying at a residential college (approximately $175) or private boarding. Of the 16 rural students participating in this research questionnaire, only 2 receive financial assistance from the government by means of Outside. This resulting in the total financial cost for attending university itself and in addition for many rural students the cost of living in Perth must be paid for by themselves and/or their families, a cost not considered by city students. Parents financially supported their child by means of paying all expenses (2 participants), all living expenses (6), rent (9), car maintenance (3), university expenses (7), and other (2) which includes setting up a house and/or food.

For a number of students financial support their parents were able to provide was not enough and therefore they required employment so as to remain living substantially in Perth. Some of these students who require employment found it placed pressure on them to meet university requirements, because of the time and energy their job required. Yet their job was financially essential.

Financial difficulties as identified by the rural students themselves were not only obtaining and having enough money to live in Perth and thus attend university, but also managing money matters such as paying bills. All of which takes time, time which would otherwise be spent on university requirements. Many social clubs and sporting groups were not a part of the participants lives in Peth as they would have been at home, due to the difficulty in reaching the destination and the financial travelling and joining fee.

Below are additional financial comments made by the participants when given the opportunity to add the questionnaire, with reference to issue facing rural students undertaking tertiary studies in Perth, Western Australia.

"There is not a sufficient financial system in place for country students."

"One thing I think is a major disadvantage for rural students is the financial side. For city students it would be their choice (in general(to move out of home where as for country kids they haven't a choice."

"It the government can 'give out' dole payments to the unemployed, I believe that they can also provide some financial assistance to those of us who wish to better ourselves, our future and our country by way of study at university and tertiary levels.

DISCUSSION

As identified from the very beginning of this research paper, rural youth are a minority group of Australia's population. So too, and perhaps because of, they are a minority group of

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Australia's education system. The 1996 enrolment statistics for Edith Cowan University, illustrates this with reference to tertiary level education. Of the total 19094 students enrolled at Edith Cowan University, either studying full or part time, only 2502 were rural students as compared to the 14048 metropolitan students. It could be correctly assumed that this minority status exists in all West Australian universities. And so perhaps the questions that need to be asked are 1. why is this so? and 2. what can be done to overcome or at least lessen the gap?

To the answer the first question, why are rural students in minority status to their metropolitan university colleges?, reference must be made to the results of this research, documented on previous pages 13 to 18. Results in the form of issues facing rural students undertaking tertiary studies in Perth, Western Australia.

It is the fact that rural students are faced with so many more issues than university itself, but because of university itself (ie. living in and coping with a new environment away from home and support) that makes it all the more harder for them to attend, deal with and succeed at university. As identified in the results these issues or difficulties faced by rural students maybe emotional, social or financial. They may even be a combination of all three. Often if an issue arises in one of these domains of the rural student's life, it soon affects another of the above, resulting added pressure. An example as identified through analysis of the results is, if employment is financially required so as to live in Perth so as to attend university, the time and energy needed for the job often limits that which would otherwise be spent on university assignments and/or study. The rural student then becomes anxious about coping with the university requirements and upset themselves emotionally. Although a metropolitan student may also experience such ordeals, they usually have the choice about moving out of home and therefore leaving family, support and resources, something a rural student doesn't if they wish to further their education in Perth.

Many more issues were identified throughout the results and all of which support the original belief of all participants in this research that rural students are disadvantaged when attending university in Perth, because of their rural status and consequently these issues that face them. These difficulties also provide support for and perhaps reasoning behind the fact that "rural students historically and currently have a lower retention rate in both secondary and tertiary education/"

With the number of issues that do face rural students, the additional pressures of university will increase and thus so will the low retention rate of rural students at tertiary level education. It is also the reasoning behind why Rural Students are in minority status in university enrolments and therefore life improving opportunities.
None of the above will change unless some action is taken to actively bring it about. Out of all issues facing rural students undertaking tertiary studies in Perth, Western Australia, it was financial issues that were of greatest concern. It became evident that out of the 16 participants only 2 receive Austudy.

Austudy is a form of government financial assistance that "provides help to disadvantaged students who are 16 years of age or over and whose own family financial circumstances are such that without help, full time study would not be possible" (Commonwealth Dept of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1997, p.3). this is wonderful for those rural students that do relieve it but for those who don't , the majority of this research, as well as a few that do, it still leaves the additional financial cost, a burden for many, of living away from home and in which there is no choice, on the students and/or their family. It is this additional cost that is not even a consideration for city students and/or their families

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Surely by the government providing additional financial assistance, as well as Outside, to ALL rural students, the number of university enrolments with respect to rural students, will increase. Thus the number of degrees obtained and greater employment opportunities will also increase. This lowering youth unemployment and unemployment payments for the government.

Provision of help to rural students for overcoming or dealing with the issues that face the, is not primarily a government role. As the reason for the transition to Perth is university, the universities themselves many need to assess their means of support to rural tertiary students. If such groups do already exist the students awareness of it and its accessibility need to be assessed. Although the majority of issues identified are emotional, social, or financial it has been identified and stated that they may affect more than one particular domain of the rural students lifestyle. If a student is having emotional difficulties, his/her mind will be anywhere but of academic importance. It is this that should be of concern to the universities. It is understood that universities aren't there to provide a emotional, social or financial help line rather they are there to provide for academic learning, but it must also be understood that this academic learning will not occur until all other areas of the rural students new lifestyle are under control.

Support groups on university campuses can and do take many different forms. There are support groups such as counsellors, academic staff, student administration and the medical suites, etc but coming to the new life of university in Perth a city, may be overwhelming enough. To then try to obtain help from all various resources never used before becomes yet another issue that faces rural students.

Comments were made by participants in the research questionnaire about the provision of support groups primarily for rural students. Such support groups could offer support and knowledge about simple yet often taken for granted things such as catching public transport, use of library computers and photocopiers to larger issues of accommodation, financial help and accessing other required resources. They also help provide support by means of having someone to talk to, whether it be in times of need or not, and therefore providing for the emotional and social wellbeing of the universities rural students. Social activities also may be arranged allowing for interaction with other for similar backgrounds and therefore perhaps similar experiences. This particular benefit of a support group helping those who found it or do find it difficult to establish new friendships. The benefits of such groups are endless, the help and support they can offer and provide to rural tertiary students is priceless.

Discussed above are only two means of provision for, or dealing with the many issues that do face rural students undertaking tertiary studies in Perth, Western Australia. Yet these two; government funding and university rural support groups could be the make or break for many rural students undertaking or considering university in Perth.

CONCLUSION

It was the purpose of this research to identify the issues facing rural students undertaking tertiary studies in Perth, Western Australia. By doing do, lessening the gap between personal experiences and documented information derived via 16 participants personal experiences, now allowing for the expansion of further knowledge, positive experiences, provision for and perhaps even further research into this important topic affect rural youths, families and education.